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ABSTRACT

A study examined the processes and criteria of assignment to honors English classes in the context of the transition from middle to high school. Five midwestern school districts--four public school districts and one Catholic diocese--participated in the study. Data consisted of interviews with school staff, school records, and student survey questionnaires. Results indicated that although student performance affected placement in all districts, four of the five relied heavily on past ability-group placements in assigning students for ninth-grade English. This practice tends to limit opportunities for upward mobility for students outside the honors level. Results also indicated that although students and parents have formal control over the assignment process, only one district showed any evidence of this control being exercised. (Four tables of data and 3 notes are included; 36 references are attached.) (Author/RS)

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ACCESS TO EXCELLENCE: ASSIGNMENT TO HONORS ENGLISH CLASSES IN THE TRANSITION FROM MIDDLE TO HIGH SCHOOL

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ACCESS TO EXCELLENCE:
ASSIGNMENT TO HONORS ENGLISH CLASSES
IN THE TRANSITION FROM MIDDLE TO HIGH SCHOOL

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the processes and criteria of assignment to honors English classes in five midwestern communities. It advances our knowledge in this area by setting the placement process in the context of the transition from middle to high school; by considering the processes and criteria of assignment simultaneously, using qualitative and quantitative data; and by examining placement within a subject-matter area (English). Interviews with school staff provide descriptive accounts of the stratification processes in each district, revealing a number of differences between districts. Preliminary analyses of longitudinal survey data using OLS regression further elucidate these differences. Although student performance affects placement in all districts, four of the five rely heavily on past ability-group placements in assigning students for ninth-grade English. This practice tends to limit opportunities for upward mobility for students outside the honors level. Another finding is that although students and parents have formal control over the assignment process, only one district showed any evidence of this control being excercised.

ACCESS TO EXCELLENCE:
ASSIGNMENT TO HONORS ENGLISH CLASSES
IN THE TRANSITION FROM MIDDLE TO HIGH SCHOOL

High school tracking continues to receive attention from sociologists. In recent years, longitudinal studies have documented effects on achievement and on post-secondary educational attainment (see Gamoran and Berends, 1987, for a review). The significant impact of secondary school stratification, as one study concluded, "makes it all the more important that the practices of assigning and moving students be both pedagogically sound and fair" (Natriello, Pallas, and Alexander, 1989, p.117). Despite its importance, however, research on who gets assigned to the different tracks has been more limited, relying mainly on cross-sectional data and on a narrow set of prediction criteria. The actual process through which assignment occurs has received relatively little notice.

This study contributes to our understanding of the placement process and its outcomes. It argues, first, that some of the limitations of previous research can be overcome by examining track assignment in the context of an educational transition: the move from middle to high school. Such transitions may serve as key points in students' educational careers (Bidwell, 1989). Second, the paper moves beyond the study of ascribed versus achieved characteristics as placement criteria, to examining the organizational linkages that are central to the placement process. Third, following the work of Garet and DeLany (1988), the paper shows that analyses within subject areas--in this case, English--avoid the ambiguity of assessing track assignment in schools that have no formal tracking (Garet and DeLany, 1988).

Current Knowledge on the Placement Process

In the 1970's, a number of survey analyses were conducted to learn whether track assignment was more closely associated with achieved or ascribed characteristics (Heyns, 1974; Alexander and McDill, 1976; Alexander, Cook, and McDill, 1978; Rehberg and Rosenthal, 1978). The results pointed to achievement as the main criterion, with additional, smaller effects of family background. Work during the 1980's considered organizational conditions as well, indicating, for example, that students had a better chance of entering a college-preparatory track in a school that reserved more spaces in that program (DeLany, 1986; Jones, Vanfossen, and Spade, 1986; Gamoran, 1987; Sørensen, 1987; Garet and DeLany, 1988; Gamoran and Mare, 1989).

Despite the contributions of these studies, our knowlege of the stratification process has three important shortcomings. First, we know little about transitions across levels of schooling. Second, studies of the criteria of track placement have been divorced from studies of the process. Third, ambiguity in the concept of a "track" in contemporary high schools needs to be recognized.

The Transition to High School

In some countries, it is obvious that shifts from one level of schooling to the next constitute the key points at which educational stratification must be examined. In Japan, for example, students move from an academically heterogeneous junior high system to a highly stratified set of high schools, a transition which essentially dictates their subsequent educational trajectories (Rohlen, 1983). The assignment process in Japan could not be

understood without examining it at this point (Kariya and Rosenbaum, 1987). Stratification in American high schools is not as salient, but to understand it fully it may be just as important to consider the transition point at which it occurs. In the U.S., as in Japan, the high school placement process begins before high school, so studies of track assignment need to begin at an earlier point in time.

To what extent do students' academic records follow them across the levels of the school system? Using the only American survey of tracking with data prior to high school entry, Alexander and Cook (1982) learned that students who took a foreign language in junior high had a better chance of enrolling in the college track in high school (see Gamoran and Berends, 1987, p.417, for a list of survey data sets). Rosenbaum (1976) found the same pattern in a case study. The finding may reflect a broader set of linkages that connect the junior and senior high stratification systems. This interpretation is compatible with data from Israel and from Taiwan, which showed that students' ability-group positions in eighth grade influenced their high school trajectories independently of their achievement levels (Yogev, 1981; Hsieh, 1987).

Two other U.S. case studies also testified to the importance of students' records prior to high school for high school placement (Cicourel and Kitsuse, 1963; Moore and Davenport, 1988). In a study of school stratification in Chicago, Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, Moore and Davenport (1988, p.54) discovered that "participation in a particular track or group within an elementary or junior high school was often necessary to participate in a desired track or program in high school." In order to understand

why some students gain admission to high-status positions in high school, one must consider their positions in junior high.

Another reason for gathering data prior to high school entry is that reliance on later information confuses the causes of track placement with its consequences. For example, Gamoran and Mare (1989) used achievement test scores from High School and Beyond (HSB), a nationally- representative survey data set, to assess probablilities of assignment to the college-preparatory track in tenth grade. Because achievement was measured at the same point in time as track position--spring of the sophomore year--this analysis probably overestimated the effects of achievement on track placement. On the other hand, studies that omit prior achievement from the analysis almost certainly overstate the importance of other variables, such as students' social class backgrounds (e.g., Lee and Bryk, 1988). Collecting data before students enter high school helps resolve this problem.

Separate Studies of Criteria and Processes

There have been many studies of placement criteria, and a few of the placement process, but the two have not been synthesized well. For example, by observing interaction between counselors and students, Cicourel and Kitsuse (1963) learned that grades and test scores were evaluated differently for students from different sorts of families. Low-income students with low grades and average test scores were directed to the low track, but students with similar performance records from middle-income families were placed in a middle track. This finding might be seen as a hypothesis worthy of testing in a multivariate framework; yet such a test has never been

applied. More generally, insights from observers about how the placement process works need to be brought to bear on quantitative studies of who is admitted to the preferred tracks and classes (Garet and DeLany, 1988).

The situation is complicated by the diversity of placement processes across school districts. In sharp contrast to Japan, where admission practicies are the same at all high schools (performance on an entrance test is the sole criterion), American high schools differ widely in the procedures used to divide students. Some attend to student preferences, while others allow little student choice (Lee and Bryk, 1988). Some schools seem to provide different amounts of information to students, depending on social class, race, or prior ability group, but others may not discriminate in this manner (Cicourel and Kitsuse, 1963; Heyns, 1974; Rosenbaum, 1976; Oakes, 1985). In some districts, students' programs for the first year of high school are devised by junior high staff, but elsewhere these decisions occur in the high school. Finally, most schools seem to rely on a combination of teacher recommendations, test scores, and prior coursework, but they differ in the weight attached to each condition.

Such diversity in the processes of stratification may affect the criteria of assignment as well as students' assignment probabilities. Whereas the pattern detected by Cicourel and Kitsuse may be important in one district, it might matter less in a district in which counselors have less discretion, placing students purely on the basis of prior rank or test scores. Consequently, studies of placement criteria need to be viewed in the context of the assignment practices in particular school systems.

Ambiguity in the Definition of Track Positions

Not only do districts differ in assignment practices, but they also vary in the categories into which students are divided, and in what constitutes a college-preparatory program. Indeed, it seems that many or even most American high schools have no formal tracking system. Students are typically divided into levels, or ability groups, for specific courses, but not into overall tracks that dictate their entire programs of study (Oakes, 1985; Moore and Davenport, 1988).

The notion of a track may not have lost its utility, for subject-specific divisions may coincide to form unacknowledged tracks within a school (Finley, 1984; Moore and Davenport, 1988). But when the term is absent from the official vocabulary, it becomes difficult to define exactly what a track is and who resides in each one. In this case tracking is an artifical construct, used by the researcher to describe a pattern or structure within a school, but lacking meaning in the minds of participants, particularly students.

Course-level stratification does not suffer from this ambiguity. Courses for a given grade are typically divided into levels with titles that clearly indicate their standing: honors, regular, and basic, for example, are typical labels for ninth grade English courses (Moore and Davenport, 1988). Or, especially in math, courses may be arranged in a sequence: general math, pre-algebra, algebra, geometry, and so on. In either case, the status rankings are clear to all participants. Thus, learning about placement criteria and processes for specific courses seems central to our understanding of stratification in high schools (Garet and DeLany, 1988).

Although Moore and Davenport (1988) noted some instances of "block-rostering," in which students were assigned to several courses at the same ability level simultaneously, generally it appears that placement decisions are made on a subject-by-subject basis, sometimes even occurring inside subject-matter departments in high schools: the English department makes out the list for honors English, the math department decides whom to admit to freshman algebra, and so on (Oakes, 1985). Thus, both the ambiguity about what constitutes a "track," and the subject-specifity of decisions, lead one to consider the process and criteria of placement for particular courses, rather than for overall tracks or programs.

Access to Honors English at High School Entry

These considerations suggest a particular approach for studying secondary school stratification. First, they point out that to understand high school placement one must begin at the junior-high level. Second, they indicate that placement criteria need to be examined in the context of processes that vary across districts. Third, they show that at least one avenue for research is to study subject-specific placement, rather than assignment to overall tracks. In response, I have examined movement into ninth-grade honors English classes, with attention to the placement processes in five communities, using data from junior as well as senior high schools.

Why study honors English? Besides the reasons given for studying a single department, why this one in particular? Divisions within English courses--especially the distinction between honors and other classes--matter for schooling outcomes. National survey

data show that students who enrolled in honors English classes gained more on tests of reading, writing, and vocabulary (Gamoran, 1987). Furthermore, students in different levels of a given English course are exposed to different sorts of knowledge, with those in higher-status groups reading more classic literature, writing more, and engaging in more criticism than those in other classes (Keddie, 1971; Ball, 1981; Oakes, 1985; Gamoran, 1989). Honors English classes may be a source of cultural capital, providing students with the familiarity with and understanding of high-status literature that will enable them to participate in social elites. Thus, who gets to enroll in honors English is a question of interest in its own right, in addition to being a useful direction for the study of high-school stratification.

The Placement Process in Five Communities

In adopting this approach, I examined the stratification process in five communities, including four public school districts--one suburban, one small-town/rural, and two urban districts--and one Catholic diocese spanning an urban and suburban area. All five communities are located in the midwest. These districts participated in a larger study of the causes and consequences of tracking in ninth grade.[1] For this part of the study, data were gathered from three sources: interviews with school staff; school records; and student survey questionnaires. Staff members interviewed included the principal and one or more English teachers from each junior and senior high; the English department chair from each high school; and a guidance counselor wherever there

was one on staff. Data were collected from the junior highs in 1987-88, and from the senior high schools during the following year.

The analytic strategy combines a multi-site case study approach with a quantitative analysis. I first used the interview data to learn how school staff perceive the placement process in the five communities. From these descriptions I derived predictions about the placement criteria in each district, which I then examined quantitatively using data from the surveys and the school records.

District A: "Meritocratic" Assignment

District A consists of a single high school that draws students from well-to-do suburbs, with a few less advantaged students bussed in from a nearby city. Two of the district's feeder middle schools participated in the study; one contained about 70 eighth graders, and the other had nearly twice that. The high school freshman class numbered about 400 students.

"Performance grouping" is the term used to describe stratification in the high school. Counselors, principals, and department heads were unanimous in emphasizing the meritocratic nature of placement in their system. Placement is based solely on past performance, they maintained, which is indicated by test scores, teacher recommendations, and grades.

Each spring, eighth-grade English teachers are asked to recommend a ninth-grade class level for each student: basic, regular, accelerated, or honors. They are asked to consider motivation and class performance when filling out the recommendation forms. These recommendations, along with standardized test scores and a sample of each student's writing, are sent to the high-school

English department. According to the English department head, the standardized test result is the most important criterion, followed by the teacher recommendation. "The recommendation helps explain discrepancies betwen the standardized test and the writing sample," she explained.

School staff consistently reported that students and parents rarely object to the assigned courses. When questions arise, the matter is discussed; this is the only point at which a guidance counselor might become involved. If parents insist, their wishes are honored, but this is said to occur only two or three times each year out of all ninth grade English placements.

Table 1 summarizes the placement process in each district as described by school staff. On the basis of the interviews it appears that in District A, access to honors English depends on test scores, grades, and effort, with little or no independent impact of ascribed characteristics or prior placement.

District B: "Bureaucratic" Assignment

District B consists of a small town and the surrounding rural area. About 10% of the students live on farms, and virtually all students are white and non-Hispanic. The district contains one junior high and one high school, each with about 220 students per grade.

As in District A, students in District B are assigned to stratified ninth-grade English classes. Again, parents rarely object, and again teacher recommendations and test scores were mentioned as criteria. But the placement criteria were used in a

very different way, in a process that seems best described as "bureaucratic."

In contrast to District A, where placement decisions are made by high school staff, assignments in District B are largely determined at the junior high. In English, the eighth-grade teachers begin with the current class lists, make any adjustments they see fit, and pass on the lists to the high school via the guidance department. Thus, in District B the junior high teachers provide not simply recommendations, but the actual lists that comprise the ninth grade classes.

Ninth-grade assignments appeared to replicate eighth grade positions in two ways. First, at an organizational level, the structure of stratification in the English department is identical in the two schools: students are divided into advanced, regular, and low-ability classes. Second, at an individual level, it was clear that students' ninth-grade positions were largely predetermined. This was evident from the manner in which assignments were made: the eighth-grade teachers relied mainly on the eighth grade lists, making changes only at the margins. The close relation between eighth- and ninth-grade honors English was acknowledged by the junior-high guidance counselor: "The (advanced) English curriculum is more complicated... the eighth grade accelerated curriculum is needed before one can be in the high school accelerated class." Although standardized test scores are available to the junior high teachers, they rarely consult them when filling out their lists. Performance in class, however, might cause the teachers to move a student to or from the honors level.

Of course the placement process is bureaucratic in all the districts in that it conforms to set procedures and involves written files in each case. In District B, though, I was especially struck by the organizational mechanisms with which staff members engaged in the placement process. They approached assignment as an organizational problem in which the key issue was creating class lists, rather than as an educational problem in which students' abilities and needs had to be assessed. By describing this system as "bureaucratic," I wish to emphasize the attention to organizational concerns.

It is important to recognize that this system is not considered capricious or non-meritocratic in the district. Indeed, the high school English department chair described the differences between class levels in terms of test scores. But the correlation between rank and test scores in this district appears to result largely from a cumulative process of assignment based on teacher judgment, with attention to test scores in earlier years. According to the junior high counselor, the staff believes that by the eighth grade, appropriate placement decisions have already been made. Experimentation occurs during seventh grade, he reported, so that positions are well established by eighth grade.

The interviews lead to the conclusion that the influential placement criteria in District B are not the same as in District A. In District B, it seems that entry to ninth-grade advanced English depends largely on having been enrolled in eighth-grade advanced English. Standardized test scores appear largely irrelevant, but indicators of course performance, such as grades or effort, might play a minor role.

District C: "Bureaucratic-Voluntary" Assignment

District C is located in an urban community with three junior high schools feeding into two high schools, all of which participated in the study. The high schools each contained about 400 freshmen. The average student in District C has working class parents and may be a member of a minority group: the district is about 45% white, 30% black, and 25% Hispanic and others. There is some economic diversity in the district; about 20% of the students had parents with managerial or professional occupations.

Bureaucratic procedures were salient in District C. As in District B, decisions occur at the junior high level. The junior high counselors send packets of registration forms to the high schools, indicating the classes in which each student is to enroll. These forms are prepared by junior high counselors and teachers. In two schools the teachers mark recommendations first, and give them to the counselors who compare them to test scores; in the third the counselor fills out the forms first and passes them on to the teachers.

According to these staff members, teacher recommendations and standardized tests serve as the main assignment criteria. But the system in District C was similar to the bureaucratic process in District B in that it was managed as a logistical rather than as an educational problem. The process had evolved out of a struggle between the junior and senior high guidance departments. In the past, I was told, recommendations made at the junior high level had been drastically revised at the high school. This led to resentment among the junior high staff, who thought their judgment was questioned and their work ignored. Consequently the senior high

staff agreed to abide by the junior high decisions. The counselors in both high schools reported that they adjust the placements only for "consistency:" to make sure that no student was registered for both honors English and basic history, for example. It seemed to me that these adjustments were made to conform to standard practice rather than to ensure that students' needs were met. One high school department chair complained that students were often assigned to the wrong levels because the junior high staff did not understand the system. But her objections did not affect the assignment process or its results.

Formally, students and parents play a role in the process: before the registration forms are delivered to the high schools they are sent home for parent signatures. However, parents almost always sign for what the teachers and counselors have recommended, and if they object, they are required to sign a waiver acknowledging that assignment was based on their own decision and was opposed by school staff.

There is one important exception to the absence of parental choice. One of the high schools has a school-within-a-school program with a heavy academic emphasis. Enrollment in this program is voluntary, and students need only be at or above grade level in standardized test results. Although the program is not reserved for high achievers, students are told to expect a heavy workload, and to a large extent the students are self-selected on an academic basis. Thus, in this district there are two routes to a high-status English class: one could be assigned to an honors class by junior high counselors and teachers; or one could sign up for the academically rigorous school-within-a-school program.

Socioeconomic status (SES) may also play a role in placement in District C. First, one might expect high-SES parents to be better informed and more eager to have their students sign up for the school-within-a-school program. Second, the counselor at one of the senior high schools acknowledged that students from high-status families were a bit more likely to be pushed toward the high-status programs:

> Interviewer: Would family background play a part [in assignment]?
> Counselor: Only in a positive sense, if the student was capable of more [challenging work].

Third, the comments of a junior high counselor seemed to reflect expectations that vary by students' backgrounds:

> We are too optimistic in American education--someone ought to tell these kids the truth. They need to see themselves in a realistic way. But that [telling them the truth] gets softened here due to the ethnic and economic makeup of this school.

This counselor argued that poor, minority students need a clearer understanding of what the future is likely to hold for them. In effect, he was advocating a more efficient "cooling-out" process, which might lessen low-SES students' chances to obtain high rank (Clark, 1961; Karabel, 1972). Finally, when the high school counselors adjust course assignments for "consistency," low-SES students might more often be shifted downward because they are less likely to be registered for multiple honors courses in the first place.

Because of the centrality of organizational concerns in the placement process, it appears that prior coursework, grades, and test scores all exert moderate influences on assignment to honors English in this district. The effects of prior positions appear

smaller than in District B, and the impact of test scores seems less than in District A. In addition, one would expect to find effects of SES, which may occur directly, for the reasons listed above, and indirectly, through students' educational plans, reflecting the voluntary sign-up for the school-within-a-school program.

District D: "Meritocratic-Advocacy" Assignment

District D is an urban community with several middle and high schools. We asked one of the high schools, with a freshman class of about 450, and its two feeder middle schools to participate in the study. Demographically, the segment of District D involved in the study is a mirror image of District C: both are urban, but whereas C consists mainly of working class families with some professionals, D contains mostly professionals with a minority of working-class families. The high school in District D we studied is mostly white, with about 15% minority students, mainly black. In District C, more than one informant said that only the honors classes are really college-preparatory; by contrast, several sources in District D described the whole school as a college-prep program, and others noted that all non-remedial courses are geared toward college entry.

The placement process in District D differed from those of the others in important ways. The middle schools did not stratify the eighth-grade English classes. Consequently the connections between eighth- and ninth-grade ability grouping that are so salient in District B, and that may also matter in District C, cannot play a role in District D. In fact, selection was delayed until high school in all subjects except math.

Delayed selection emerged as a theme of the assignment process in the interviews. Counselors and department heads seemed to hold a

proactive, advocacy stance towards enrolling students in challenging academic courses. This view was best articulated by one of the junior high counselors, who claimed to pay special attention to discussing college options with minority students. In one-on-one meetings, she said,

> I almost always raise the issue of college....I know some students have aspirations that are too low, and I try to counter that by encouraging them to realize their potential. I also let them know where they can get more information....I am aware of my power to influence their goals, and I try to mention all their options.

While this counselor may have exaggerated her ability to raise aspirations, I found the theme of delayed selection running through the comments of many staff members in the district. When asked on a questionnaire whether her class should be considered college-preparatory, the teacher of the low-ability ninth-grade English class commented, "Please remember that Winston Curchill went through high school in remedial classes. He was considered too slow to study Latin or Greek." Staff in this district seemed to hold an anti-cooling-out attitude, in contrast to what I found in District C.

At the time of registration, all students sign up for English 9. Later, high school staff administer a writing test for admission to the ninth grade honors class, which may be attempted by any student. After rating the tests, the high school teachers send the test results to eighth-grade English teachers, indicating the students who appear qualified for the honors class and soliciting comments. The high school English department chair stated that these comments are an important consideration in the selection process.

The anti-cooling-out stance of District D can be expected to (a) eliminate the effects of prior coursework on subsequent placement; (b) eliminate class and ethnicity effects; and (c) raise the impact of eighth grade class performance indicators such as grades and effort. Although standardized test scores were not actually used in the assignment process, they will probably appear to exert a moderate impact because of their correlation with the placement test.=

Diocese E: "Meritocratic" Assignment

Diocese E consists of the Catholic community in a metropolitan area. It proved difficult to examine the transition from eighth to ninth grade in Catholic schools, because each Catholic high school draws students from 40 or more different feeder schools. For the study, we selected a large, comprehensive high school and the five feeder schools that make the greatest contribution to its freshman class. This high school also enrolled about 450 freshmen. Students came mainly from middle class families, with economic heterogeneity but little racial diversity, as 95% of the students were white.

The assignment process in Diocese E bears similarities to those of Districts A and D. Decisions are made at the high school; test scores figure prominently in the process; and, as in District D, the Catholic-school decision-makers appear to take seriously the counseling aspect of registration for high school. Each student is assigned to a teacher-advisor, a high school teacher who counsels him or her for all four years of high school, and who has only five or six advisees from each grade. The head of guidance at the high school reported that the teacher-advisor system was installed "to

bring some personalism, some individual attention to the advising process." The teacher-advisor is closer to the students than an ordinary counselor would be, having a relatively small number of students to advise and meeting as a group on a daily basis.

Each February, the teacher-advisors meet with the incoming ninth graders and their parents to discuss registration for the following year and students' long-term goals. The teacher-advisors have students' past performance records at hand, including test scores and report cards, and various options are discussed. According to the principal, "Ninth graders are registered for classes by their teacher-advisor with their parents present. Ordinarily, this is a consensus decision." It was nonetheless clear that school staff play the major role in determining the outcome of this consensus, at least with respect to honors English assignment. Each year, the English department chair prepares a list of students who may be assigned to honors English, based on placement test results. Occasionally, she mentioned, parents with older children who have passed through the school request the honors class before assignment is made. She said she honors these requests if the test scores warrant it.

There is no regular contact with the feeder schools concerning English class assignment. Teacher recommendations are solicited in math and science, but not in English. Thus, the quantitative data are likely to reveal no ties between junior high rank and performance and high school placement, except as manifested in the test results.

Comparison of Placement Criteria

Table 2 lists the indicators of placement criteria available for assessing the predictions that emerged from the interviews. The variables are presented in three categories: ascribed characteristics, including gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status; achieved characteristics, including performance (test scores and grades) and effort (absenteeism and time spent on homework); and organizational linkages, indicated by students' ability group positions in eighth-grade English/reading and language arts classes. Past enrollment in foreign language and algebra classes are also included as possible indicators of an overall tracking system that extends from junior to senior high school.

Not all variables are relevant in each district. Race and ethnicity are considered only in districts that contained at least four students in the minority category. As noted earlier, District D had no eighth-grade ability grouping in English. In Districts A and C, eighth-grade English was divided into separate classes for reading and language arts, with the former stratified into high, regular, and low levels, and the latter consisting of high and regular classes.

In the Catholic and suburban schools, which tended to be smaller, all eighth graders were included in the study. In the small-town and urban schools, four English and four social studies classes were selected to participate, making sure to include at least one class from each eighth-grade ability-group level. Because of overlapping membership between the English and social studies classes, this selection yielded approximately 125 students from each of the small-town and urban schools.

In all, 1102 students participated in the fall and spring of eighth grade, and 826, or 75%, were followed to ninth grade. Follow-up rates varied across districts because of differences in enrollment patterns. In districts A, B, and C, where nearly all students attend the high schools included in the study, follow-up rates were 90.6%, 88.9%, and 84%, respectively. The greater attrition in District C is due to more students moving out of the district. In District D a follow-up rate of 68.8% resulted from two factors: First, although the vast majority of students from the two participating middle schools enrolled in the high school we selected, some enrolled in other high schools in the district. Second, 20 students (8% of the total) whom we attempted to follow were unable to complete the fall ninth-grade questionnaire because they did not have the necessary study hall. Despite these losses, the students we followed are representative of those who took the standard path from a participating middle school to the high school we included.

Of 172 eighth graders we studied in the feeder schools in Diocese E, 65 attended the high school in our study, and all were included in the follow-up. This represents a follow-up rate of 37.8% when computed as in the other districts, but it includes the entire population of students who followed the path from the selected Catholic K-8 schools to this particular Catholic comprehensive high school. Thus in Districts A, B, and C, the samples represent the populations of the entire districts, but in District D and Diocese E the population represented is that of students moving through the particular middle and high schools chosen for this study.

Preliminary Analysis

Tables 3 and 4 present preliminary analyses of the quantitative data. There are two sets of analyses: The first examines main effects of the placement criteria in each district, and the second considers interactions that indicate whether good grades foster mobility across track levels in the transition from eighth to ninth grade.

At present I have relied on ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis. Subsequent versions of the paper will improve on this method in two ways: First, I will use logistic regression analysis, a method that is more appropriate for a dichotomous dependent variable. Second, I will provide statistical tests for differences across districts in the model parameters. These improvements will permit a test of whether, for example, SES effects appear only in District C, as I have hypothesized (see Table 1). OLS regression offers a good first approximation of the more sophisticated models.

The analyses in Table 3 conform in some ways to what was expected on the basis of the interviews, but they do not tell exacly the same story. As predicted, higher test scores increase the chances of selection to honors English in every case but District B, where assignment is almost exclusively based on eighth-grade positions. Grades and absenteeism lack influence, but students who report spending more time on homework tend to be placed higher in districts that rely on teacher recommendations: A, B, and D. Educational plans affect placement only in District C, the one system in which student or parental choice appeared to play a significant role.

In the Catholic school (E) students who were unsure of their plans were much more likely to enter honors English, other things being equal. This result may reflect collinearity problems, as it appears in the smallest sample. Alternatively, the teacher-advisors in this school may counsel unsure students to enter the more difficult class. This interpretation is consistent with the general counseling approach in the school, and it also accords with other research indicating that Catholic high schools are more likely to challenge students academically (Coleman and Hoffer, 1987; Lee and Bryk, 1988).

All five columns in Table 3 show that controlling for background and achievement variables, minority students face no disadvantage in the assignment process, a finding that replicates other studies (Rosenbaum, 1980; Alexander and Cook, 1982; Garet and DeLany, 1988; Gamoran and Mare, 1989). Family background, however, exerts a significant impact in Districts A and C. As I suspected based on the interviews, higher-SES students in the working-class urban district (C) are more likely to gain access to advanced English courses. However, I did not anticipate the significant effects of SES in District A. Even looking back over the interviews, it is difficult to detect the point at which status considerations enter the assignment process. One possibility is that family background influenced teacher recommendations, although I found no reason to expect this any more than in Districts B and D, which also relied on teacher recommendations. A more likely possibility is that high-SES parents more often make their wishes known to school administrators, pressing successfully for access to honors English.

In additional analyses, I tested the generalizability of Cicourel and Kitsuse's (1963) finding that grades and test scores were evaluated differently depending on student SES. Grades-by-SES and tests-by-SES interactions were not significant in any district, and their inclusion had no meaningful influence on the pattern of main effects. The process uncovered by Cicourel and Kitsuse was not at work in these districts. (Results not shown; available from the author on request.)

Perhaps the most striking finding in Table 3 is the strong, consistent impact of students' eighth-grade positions on their ninth grade assignments. These effects turned out to be equally powerful in districts where they were and were not anticipated. It was clear from the interviews that prior rank plays the major role in District B, and this is confirmed in Table 3. I also anticipated this pattern in District C, where it looms large. But contrary to expectations, District A students who belonged to high-ability reading and language arts classes in eighth grade had more access to ninth-grade accelerated English, other things being equal. A similar pattern even appears in District D, despite its lack of ability grouping in eighth-grade English. In District D, students who enrolled in eighth-grade algebra were more often assigned to honors English in ninth grade, controlling for background and achievement variables. This finding may reflect an overall cross-grade tracking system, reminicient of Rosenbaum's (1976) and Alexander and Cook's (1982) finding of the advantage accruing to those enrolled in junior-high foreign-language classes. Only Diocese E, which had the weakest ties between the feeder schools and the high school, reveals no impact of prior placement.

In light of the powerful effects of prior rank in four of the five districts, what can students who do not belong to high-ability classes in eighth grade do to gain a spot in the high-status ninth grade class? Does earning an A in an average-level eighth grade class provide an opportunity for upward mobility? This question is especially pressing because grades appeared to have no influence in any district, possibly because the worth of a given grade depends on the class in which it was earned: an A in an average class might not be taken as seriously as an A from a high-ability class. If this is the case, students who are not members of the high-level class in eighth grade are limited in their opportunities for advancement.

To address this possibility, I created two new variables. The first is a dummy variable for whether or not students reported an A in eighth-grade English. The second is the interaction of this dummy variable with the dummy variable for membership in a high-ability eighth-grade English class.[3] These variables were added to the models previously estimated. They can be interpreted as follows: (a) significant effects of "Grade=A" indicate that any student's chances are improved by making an A; (b) significant effects of the "Grade=A x High English" interaction indicate that students in high-level eighth-grade classes benefit more than other students from scoring A's; (c) significant effects of Grade=A coupled with <u>negative</u> effects of the interaction would give evidence of "late-bloomer" access to honors English, showing that grades do not help those already in the honors level, but students outside it can make up lost ground by earning an A.

Table 4 presents the results for selected variables. (All variables from Table 3 were included in the analyses, but there were

no meaningful changes in the variables not directly involved in the interactions. The complete results are available on request.) The findings again differ across districts. Results for A, B and E are unchanged from those in Table 3: grades have no impact. An A in the regular class does not offer an opportunity for upward mobility, nor does it confer any special advantage to those already in the top group. In Districts A and B, this means that the disadvantage of students outside high-ability eighth-grade classes could not be tempered by making good grades.

In District C, students who made A's increased their likelihood of honors placement. This held for students generally, without conferring any special benefit on eighth-grade high-ability students (the dummy variable is influential but not the interaction), indicating a possible path for advancement for students outside the eighth-grade high-status classes. Students who received A's also increased their chances in District D, adding another meritocratic criterion in addition to the effects of test scores and homework in that district.

I found no evidence of late-bloomer effects. The pattern of coefficients in District A--a positive dummy variable and a negative interaction--is consistent with the late-bloomer interpretation, but the coefficients are not statistically significant.

Tentative Conclusions

Any conclusions at this point must be viewed as tentative, pending the outcome of the more sophisticated analyses. A key concern is whether apparent between-district differences really are significantly different. For example, I observed that SES matters

only in Districts A and C; but the coefficient for SES is nearly as large in Diocese E, although it is based on a smaller sample and is not statistically significant. Does SES actually matter any less in this community? Similarly, the non-significant coefficient for high-ability eighth-grade English is as large in Diocese E as it is in District A. Is it really inconsequential in Diocese E? These questions will be addressed with statistical tests for between-district differences in a future version of this paper.

If the current findings hold up to further scrutiny, several interesting conclusions will emerge. The first is essentially methodological: we learn more from the combination of qualitative and quantitative evidence than we would from either one alone. If this paper were restricted to the qualitative data, we would have missed the critical role of students' prior positions in Districts A and D. Had we examined only the quantitative data, we would not have understood how the organizational links actually occurred, nor why educational plans were relevant only in District C; in general we would not have known much about the placement process, although we might have speculated from the quantitative evidence. The results of this paper clearly show that qualitative and quantitative research can enhance one another when used in combination.

A second conclusion concerns the source of control over the placement process. Formally, parents and/or students controlled course enrollments. In each district, parents approved of and signed students' registration forms or schedules. However, both the interview data and the quantitative analyses confirm that parental choices are rarely excercised. As other researchers have observed, parents and students almost always "choose" what school officials

tell them to select. Only in District C did independent choices appear to occur: the interviews uncovered a voluntary high-status academic program, whose presence is presumably reflected in the significant effects of educational plans. The impact of SES in Districts A and C may also reflect a parental role in the placement process. In general, though, placement decisions are made by school officials.

A third main finding is the importance of bureaucratic procedures in the assignment process. This resulted in strong effects of prior positions on placement opportunities, much more than expected in Districts A, C, and D. Perhaps one should not be surprised by this pattern. Schools, after all, are complex organizations, making selection and sorting decisions for hundreds of students each year. It is sensible that they rely in part on past judgments when renewing assignments from one year to the next. Reliance on earlier decisions, however, has important consequences for students, giving better chances to those already in the high-ranked classes and reducing opportunities for those so far excluded.

At issue is how open the system is to mobility based on student performance. Every district revealed at least some consideration of a meritocratic criterion. Yet whereas one might expect the transition from middle to high school to be a likely point for the reevaluation of students' needs and competencies, the data show that such reconsideration is seriously limited by judgments made in earlier years.

NOTES

[1] The larger project included three more school systems which have been omitted from this study. Two were rural districts that had no honors English class in high school, and the third was a Catholic school in which only 11 students moved from eighth to ninth grade in the same system.

[2] The placement test results were not available to us. They would not have been useful in the quantitative analyses because the test was only taken by students who wished to enter the honors class.

[3] Collinearity problems prevented me from using interactions with both the reading and the language arts classes in Districts A and C. I used the Language Arts interaction because "Language Arts: High" had the more important main effects.

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Table 1. Assignment to honors English in five communities, as described by school staff.

District	Description of Placement Process	Main Decision-Maker	Main Reported Criteria	Predictions
A: public, suburban	"meritocratic"	high school English department	standardized tests teacher recommendations	Strong effects of tests, grades, and effort. Weak effects of ascribed characteristics. Weak organizational links.
B: public, small town/rural	"bureaucratic"	8th grade English teachers	teacher recommendations	Strong effects of prior positions. Weak effects of ascribed & achieved characteristics.
C: public, urban working class	"bureaucratic-voluntary"	junior high staff	teacher recommendations standardized tests student preferences for special program	Moderate effects of tests, grades, and effort. Moderate effects of prior positions. Moderate effects of eductional plans. Moderate effects of SES.
D: public, urban middle class	"meritocratic-advocacy"	high school English department	teacher recommendations placement test	Strong effects of grades and effort. Moderate effects of tests. Junior high positions irrelevant.
E: Catholic, urban/suburban	"meritocratic"	high school English department chair	placement test	Strong influence of tests. Weak effects of other achieved characteristics. Weak effects of ascribed characteristics. Junior high positions irrelevant.

Table 2. Variables included in the study. N=651 after listwise deletion of missing values.

Variable	Mean	S.D.	Description	Source
Honors English	.261	.440	Placement in ninth grade honors or accelerated English.	School records.
ASCRIBED				
Sex	.522	.500	Dummy variable: female=1, male=0.	Student questionnaire.
Race	.137	.344	Dummy variable: black=1, non-black=0.	Student questionnaire.
Ethnicity	.089	.285	Dummy variable: Hispanic=1, non-Hispanic=0.	Student questionnaire.
Socioeconomic status	-.027	.801	Unweighted standardized composite of parents' occupation, mother's education, father's education, and home resources.	Student questionnaire.
ACHIEVED				
Reading Score	65.391	25.127	National percentile scores on standardized tests	School records.
Math Score	70.485	24.819	administered by the school districts.[a]	School records.
English Grade	3.112	.835	Final grade in 8th grade English (A=4, B=3, C=2, D=1, F=0).	Student questionnaire.
Days Absent	8.138	8.083	Number of days absent during 8th grade.	School records.
Homework Time	.884	1.078	Hours per week spent on homework for 8th grade English.	Student questionnaire.
Educational Plans	16.257	1.769	Years of schooling expected, as of fall of 8th grade.[b]	Student questionnaire.
Don't Know Plans	.095	.294	Responded "don't know" to question on Educational Plans.	Student questionnaire.
ORGANIZATIONAL				
English/Reading: High	.250	.434	Enrolled in high-ability English/Reading class in 8th grade.	School records.
English/Reading: Low	.217	.412	Enrolled in low-ability English/Reading class in 8th grade.	School records.
Language Arts: High	.135	.342	Enrolled in high-ability Language Arts class in 8th grade.[c]	School records.
Foreign Language	.424	.495	Enrolled in foreign language class in 8th grade.	Student questionnaire.
Algebra	.273	.446	Enrolled in algebra class in 8th grade.	Student questionnaire.

[a] Tests varied across districts, but roughly comparable because all were on national percentile scales. Test in District D administered in spring of 8th grade; tests in other districts administered previous fall or spring.
[b] Students who responded "don't know" were scored at their within-district means, and were indicated by a dummy variable.
[c] 8th grade English divided into separate reading and language arts classes in Districts A and C.

Table 3. Preliminary analysis of placement criteria for assignment to honors English in five communities. Metric OLS regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses.

Dependent Variable: Assignment to 9th Grade Honors English

8th Grade Independent Variables	District A	District B	District C	District D	Diocese E
ASCRIBED					
Sex (female=1)	-.041	.031	.084**	.025	.066
	(.066)	(.057)	(.041)	(.061)	(.089)
Race (black=1)[a]	.021		-.060	-.015	
	(.090)		(.054)	(.132)	
Ethnicity (Hispanic=1)[b]	.187		-.039		
	(.202)		(.057)		
Socioeconomic status	.080*	.030	.056*	-.037	.053
	(.043)	(.050)	(.032)	(.045)	(.072)
ACHIEVED					
Reading Score	.004**	.000	.004***	.003*	.003
	(.002)	(.002)	(.001)	(.002)	(.003)
Math Score	.002	.000	.002*	-.001	.008**
	(.002)	(.002)	(.001)	(.002)	(.003)
Grades	.051	.062	.014	.073	.063
	(.043)	(.046)	(.024)	(.047)	(.077)
Days Absent	.000	.005	-.004	.005	-.002
	(.003)	(.005)	(.003)	(.004)	(.010)
Homework Time	.040*	.064**	-.044	.057**	-.061
	(.021)	(.030)	(.041)	(.026)	(.040)
Educational Plans	.018	.004	.025**	.031	-.046
	(.021)	(.017)	(.012)	(.024)	(.041)
Don't Know Plans	-.110	-.082	.011	-.081	.635***
	(.131)	(.084)	(.063)	(.100)	(.234)
ORGANIZATIONAL					
English/Reading: High[c]	.170*	.565***	.030		.180
	(.092)	(.085)	(.069)		(.145)
English/Reading: Low[c]	.011	-.015	.071		.003
	(.099)	(.106)	(.057)		(.138)
Language Arts: High[b]	.343***		.620***		
	(.089)		(.170)		
Foreign Language	.058	-.077	-.109	-.068	.118
	(.067)	(.064)	(.152)	(.092)	(.106)
Algebra[d]	.104	.032	-.056	.188***	
	(.071)	(.070)	(.073)	(.069)	
R^2	.643	.627	.583	.261	.369
N (listwise deletion)	137	100	229	144	62
N (before deletion)	163	120	304	174	65

*p<.10 **p<.05 ***p<.01

[a] Not applicable in District B or Diocese E.
[b] Not applicable in Districts B or D, or Diocese E.
[c] Not applicable in District D.
[d] Not applicable in Diocese E.

Table 4. Interaction of grades and ability-group level in eighth grade English in the ninth grade placement process: selected coefficients. Metric OLS regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses.

Dependent Variable: Assignment to 9th Grade Honors English

8th Grade Independent Variable	District A	District B	District C	District D	Diocese E
MAIN EFFECTS					
Grades	-.025	-.014	-.053	-.054	-.127
	(.074)	(.050)	(.034)	(.084)	(.188)
Grade=A	.201	.150	.180*	.218*	.241
	(.128)	(.143)	(.070)	(.121)	(.227)
English: High*	.420***	.430***	.601***		.015
	(.113)	(.093)	(.176)		(.347)
INTERACTION					
Grade=A x High English*	-.146	.254	.017		.191
	(.132)	(.164)	(.107)		(.364)
R^2	.651	.680	.598	.279	.391

*p<.10 **p<.05 ***p<.01

* In Districts B and E, English/Reading class; in Districts A and C, Language Arts class; not applicable in District D.